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ABSTRACT

Graduate students studying personnel evaluation were each assigned to interview three professionals regarding their experiences with personnel evaluation. Five interview questions, common across the 12 class members, were supplied. In class, students were formed into groups, a chairperson and recorder were selected for each group, and an agenda for the class meeting was reviewed. The agenda outlined the tasks of each group: to have each student share orally the evidence gathered on personnel evaluation, to combine the evidence and record it on a sheet of acetate, to draw conclusions supported by the evidence, to analyze the implications for the class's study of personnel evaluation, to identify what was learned from the entire process, and to report to the class. Several questions to promote class discussion are listed. Important outcomes of this learning activity include: (1) the interview experiences establish a background for students to tackle the content of the course; (2) by sharing their evidence orally, students reinforce what they learned from their interviews; (3) gathering, combining, reporting, and drawing conclusions from interview evidence provide an opportunity to practice important research skills; and (4) students also hone their interpersonal and communication skills. (JDD)

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DESCRIPTION OF A TASK COMPLETED BY A SMALL LEARNING GROUP

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Ball State University, 1994

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The class of graduate students studying personnel evaluation is beginning its second-week, three hour session. Part of the assignment for this meeting asked each student to interview three professionals regarding their experiences with personnel evaluation. Each professional interviewed was to be employed by a different organization and thus evaluated by a different employer. Five interview questions, common across the class members were supplied. With twelve students in the class, together they had collected personnel evaluation experiences from 36 professionals. Most students enter personnel evaluation class not having positive experiences with personnel evaluation, yet complacent. They have developed a tolerance of poor quality personnel evaluations and limited expectations that it can be improved.

Asking each of them to interview three professionals provides them with direct experiences that helps prepare them to take the study of personnel evaluation seriously. Also, it is important that they, as professionals, experience the practice of collecting interview evidence each time they face a challenge which involves people in important ways. Interviewing and combining interview evidence is a continuing and important part of their research experiences.

I prepare an agenda for each of our three-hour weekly class meetings and distribute it at the start of each meeting. After taking care of the mechanics, I might say, "Find the other most competent students in the class and form a group." (This varies. I might have students count off to determine group members. I might have assigned individuals to groups ahead of the class and printed the teams in the agenda for the evening).

Your first task is to introduce yourselves. Among other information, include one fact about yourself that you want other members to believe. Also share the name you want used when you are addressed. Use the names of your team members as you work together. We will use about five minutes for getting acquainted.

"The person in your group whose last name begins with a letter closest to the end of the alphabet is the group chair." (Of course there are many ways of identifying a chair.) The following will be printed in the agenda for the class meeting and we will skim it together.

The chairperson's responsibilities include:

1) Be sure all members understand the group's task.
2) Be certain that oral exchanges stay on task.
3) Maintain opportunities for balanced participation.
4) Assist the recorder in identifying information that needs recording.
4) The chairperson will be held responsible for the quality of the group's product.

Again, you may have students new to the program and need to provide three or four suggestions at this point about effective group participation.

The youngest person in the group is the recorder. It is the recorder's responsibility to accurately and succinctly record the actions taken by the group. Each group has a sheet of acetate and a felt tipped pen. Please write so that all can read when your report is placed on the overhead. There are more sheets here if you need them.

(Using transparencies to report each group's actions has advantages. The report on the overhead is a focus for the class while a group member is reporting. The visually oriented in the audience both see and hear as a reporter for each group reports. The notes by the recorder, to be displayed to the class may be worded more carefully. Groups reporting after the first group can limit what they speak to just the ideas on their acetate that are marked differently from those shared earlier. Since everyone can see the projects of others, there is less need for long oral reports. When I place the transparencies on and off the overhead, I control the length of the report and direct the class' questions and comments to each report. If appropriate, I can return to a report given earlier by replacing an earlier acetate on the overhead.)

Back to starting the class on their group tasks. The following directions are included in the agenda for the evening. Skim the information with the class members. Respond to any questions. Place illustration on the chalkboard if needed.

The Tasks Of Each Group::

1) Each of you should share orally, question by question, the evidence you gathered on personnel evaluation . This will allow all group members have some understanding of other member's evidence.

2) Now, combine the evidence, by question, from the nine persons the three of you interviewed. Record the combined evidence for each question on the sheet of acetate. Organize the information so others can understand it readily.

   (Since this is the second class meeting and since combining interview evidence is a complex task, it may be important at this time to review, briefly, three or four of the principles of combining interview evidence.)

   When you complete this task you will have recorded accurately, the experiences with personnel evaluation of your nine respondents.

3) The next task is to draw conclusions that are supported by the evidence you gathered from the nine interviews. Answer the question, "What can you conclude from the evidence you collected about current personnel evaluation practice?" Add your conclusions to the acetate beneath your record of evaluation experiences or add con conclusions on a separate sheet.

   (Again at this point you may need to provide instruction in drawing conclusions from interview evidence.)

4) Assuming what we have learned from our interview is even somewhat accurate for personnel evaluation, what are some implications of what you learned for what we should do in our study of personnel evaluation? Record two or three possible tasks we should undertake this semester on a transparency.

5) The last part of our task is to identify and record on the acetate some of what you have learned from the entire process. Record two or three ideas from:
   a) The process (not the content) of completing the interviews,
   b) Sharing and combining the information you gathered,
   c) Working in a group to put evidence together
   d) About each other

6) When all groups are finished, each group will report what was told to them by the nine persons, the members of each group interviewed.

After about for-five minutes of group work I interrupt. " Are you making progress? Is there information you need?" After this brief exchange, I'll announce, "When you complete the section of the task you are working on now, take about a ten minute break. Then complete you group task."

Since this is early in the course, I may walk among the groups, responding to questions and giving encouragement. When one or two groups have completed, I will encourage others to move quickly to completion. I will provide the time they seem to need, then return the class to one large group.

When all have completed, I will place one group's acetate on the overhead and ask their reporter to talk. We may share information, one or two questions at a time so that students can hold in mind the information across four reports. We consider questions such as, "What did you learn that reinforces what others learned?" "What was unique in the information your group gathered?"

Having met our intentions regarding the content of the activities, we will examine what we have learned from our experiences. Again we will refer to the information on the overhead. Further questions we might ask are:

"Will someone share how people responded when you asked them if they would answer your interview questions?"

"How did the people you interviewed feel about the questions as and after you asked the questions?"

"What did you learn about the process of putting together the responses from several people?"

"Can we develop principles for combining interview evidence?"

"What did you learn about the members of you group?

Several additional questions are possible. Students are volunteering to share observations by this time.

<u>Progress Made and Outcomes Produced:</u>

1) The interview experiences of students establishes an excellent background to tackle the content of the course in personnel evaluation. We will be starting based on their evidence, not evidence provided by me or by text materials. Most professionals they interviewed report many negative experiences with their organization's personnel evaluation. Working with evidence they have gathered, students are more ready to examine and to practice the competences of personnel evaluation that will allow them to make progress toward mastering the potential power which accrues to a skillful evaluator of personnel.

2) Students have experienced the process of gathering interview evidence using a series of interview questions. Almost inevitably, students find that gathering interview evidence about an important topic to be an exciting and rewarding experience. Most are pleased to have had rewarding and important experiences this early in the course.

3) By sharing orally the evidence they collected, students have reinforced for themselves what they learned from their interviews.

4) Students have learned vicariously by hearing the interview evidence gathered by others. Learning from others, both by interviews and by accomplishing a task together, is both rewarding and is a valuable learning competency.

5) Students have struggled with two supportive others, at the challenging task of combining and reporting accurately, interview evidence from nine interviewees.

6) Gathering, combining, reporting, and drawing conclusions from interview evidence are important research skills. We intend to reinforce and build research competencies in every course. Later we will practice developing competences of developing good interview questions.

7) Students have honed their interpersonal and communication skills as they begin to know two important persons. Hey! this class may be worthwhile!